

## Is a happy team a motivated team?



The question posed in this post is how important is happiness to team performance? We all know the old saying that '*a happy work place is a productive one*'; but which comes first, the happiness or the productivity? The truth in the saying is well established, the Whitehall Studies<sup>1</sup> have demonstrated that a motivated, happy, workplace is more productive and has better health outcomes than an unhappy one. What is less clear is the relationship between happiness, motivation and productivity; is a happy workplace an essential prerequisite to motivation, or is it a consequence of a motivated team enjoying their work and successes?

As a starting point, team performance is primarily driven by capability and motivation. Capability is a combination of skills, knowledge, and the way the team is organised and resourced, including its ability to work together as a team. Motivation creates the desire to apply the capability effectively to achieve the team's goals.

The juxtaposition explored in this post is between happiness and motivation, which is not straightforward..... A team of fire fighters dealing with a dangerous 'wild fire' are likely to be highly motivated, risking their lives to save the lives and properties of others but are not likely to be 'happy' about the situation they are in. If their efforts are successful, once the emergency is over there is likely to be a very 'happy' celebration, but the prospect of this celebration is unlikely to have any effect on their firefighting efforts. So, what is the role of happiness in team performance?

The elements associated with motivation are well defined; the basic theories are discussed in *The Evolution of Motivation*<sup>2</sup>. But none of these theories include 'happiness'! The closest is Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory of Motivation. 'Unhappiness' is a powerful de-motivator which has to be removed to allow the motivators to work; but does this flow through to the positive motivator side of the equation? 'Happiness' may be a motivator or it may be a collateral benefit that some people can derive from experiencing other positive motivators such as a sense of achievement, recognition and a sense of belonging? There are three possible scenarios:

1. The fact a team that is motivated tends to create a 'happy workplace'.
2. Happiness and motivation are independent attributes but may be influenced by the same stimuli.
3. Happiness is a significant facilitator that helps create a motivated team.

Our article on this topic looking at the Australian Cricket Team<sup>3</sup> tends to confirm the proposition that unhappiness is a de-motivator, and leans towards option 3 based on quotes the new coach brought 'fun' back into the way the team operated. Certainly, the new approach caused a major change in performance

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<sup>1</sup> For our post discussing *the Whitehall Studies* see:  
<https://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/2015/06/20/happiness-and-motivation/>

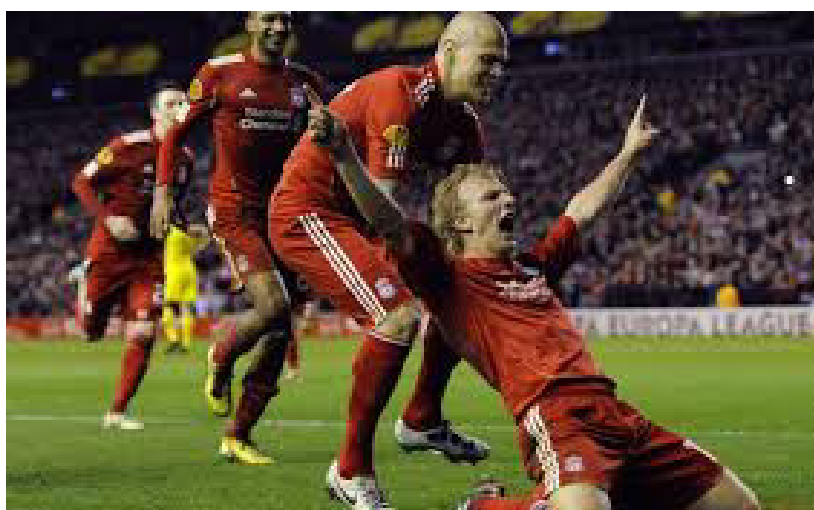
<sup>2</sup> For more on *motivation* see:  
[https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Mag\\_Articles/SA1032\\_The\\_Evolution\\_of\\_Motivation.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Mag_Articles/SA1032_The_Evolution_of_Motivation.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> The '*power of happiness*' and team performance:  
[https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Mag\\_Articles/SA1019\\_The\\_power\\_of\\_Happiness.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Mag_Articles/SA1019_The_power_of_Happiness.pdf)

standards; the success identified in 2013 largely continued, through a generational change in players, into 2016. What's not so clear is if the 'fun factor' contributed to the improved motivation and performance or if the successes of the team created happiness. There may even be a combination of both effects in a beneficial feedback loop.

## What is happiness?

As a starting point there appears to be several distinctly different types of happiness, but these may simply be different ways of expressing happiness. At one extreme, there is the 'wild euphoria' experienced when a difficult 'goal' is achieved. Think of the physical demonstrations of euphoria displayed by a soccer player who has just scored an important goal or almost any sports team when the final whistle goes in their 'grand final' match and they know they are the champions.



There may be an element of ritual to the celebrations but the euphoria seems to be genuine.

In contrast consider the quiet satisfaction experienced by a surgeon who has just finished a successful six-hour operation that has saved a patient's life but everyone knows the danger is far from over and there is months of painful recovery ahead. She knows the job has been done well, better than most others could conceivably achieve, but is also aware this success is uncertain and it is only the beginning of the recovery process.

Another manifestation of happiness is the joy of seeing a loved one, person or pet, these feelings even extend to cute strangers, particularly babies, human or furry animal. Laughter is a sign of happiness, but this can be triggered by comedy shows, jokes and the like as well as by the more emotional forms of happiness. Then there is the feeling of satisfaction generated by a fine glass of wine or a good meal.

At the opposite extreme to the football players, the Buddhist concept of contentment comes from the elimination of desire, or cravings. When these are eliminated, even temporarily, peaceful tranquillity is experienced by the practitioner. Happiness is achieved by eliminating the desire for happiness.

Then there's the range of artificial stimulants that can trigger happiness and 'feeling good' ranging from alcohol (and other stimulants) to exercise, to the thrill seekers 'highs' created by bungee jumping and other activities.....

Whilst expresses and experiences differently, these experiences of happiness are caused by three interlinked factors:

- **Biochemical happiness:** the biology of the brain seems to be designed to keep the level of happiness relatively constant. We experience feelings of pleasure when serotonin, dopamine and oxytocin are released into the bloodstream in response to a desirable stimulus; but these feelings never last for long. Human evolution used these feelings to drive desirable behaviours, and we still experience them when a 'desirable' success is achieved.

The problem is different people seem to be designed to operate at different levels of happiness; some people are naturally bubbly and happy, others far more subdued, some even appear to be naturally miserable. Other factors can have an effect on this basic setting but essentially the brains chemistry sets the baseline for each person's innate level of happiness.

- **Psychological factors:** physical environment affects perceptions of happiness. Material factors play a part in happiness, health, diet, wealth, etc., but primarily from the perspective of eliminating unhappiness. Their opposites, pain, hunger, etc., create unhappiness. However, research suggests even a dramatic change in circumstances only has a short term impact on a person's level of happiness. Once they have adapted to the new situation it becomes the expected 'norm' and the person's level of happiness reverts to their biological norm. This applies to both disasters and massive windfall gains.

The generally accepted definition of happiness is 'subjective well-being', psychologists try to assess this by asking a person a series of questions and then compiling the answers to derive a value. Money does bring happiness, but only to people on very low incomes; if not having enough money is a source of worry removing the 'worry' increases happiness. If you have basically enough money, having twice as much only brings a short burst of happiness.

The key to happiness seems to lay in expectations. If your expectations are being fulfilled you are content; whereas unrealised expectations always cause unhappiness, regardless of the reasonableness of the expectation. However, the over fulfilment of expectations only has a short-term effect on happiness before the person's expectations are re-set.

Our psychology is influenced by our surroundings. A 'normal teenager' in a small village 5000 years ago would probably have felt they were fairly good looking. Most of the other people would either be old and wrinkled or still children; there would only be a few people of the same gender to compare yourself against. Modern teenagers are exposed to 1000s of images every day of wonderfully formed people courtesy of mass media. But most of these images are of the top 0.1% of the best-looking people globally. The comparison is unreasonable but it's very difficult to avoid making. Discontent caused by comparative expectations drives unhappiness even if the comparison is unreasonable.

- **Sociological factors:** There is an important cognitive and ethical component to happiness built around seeing one's life in its entirety as meaningful and worthwhile. Nietzsche suggested 'if you have a 'why' to live, you can bear almost any 'how'. At least one element of happiness is synchronising one's personal sense of value and meaning with the prevailing collective view of value and meaning.

From the brief discussion of 'happiness' above all we can really be sure of is happiness is a subjective and complex factor, and each person's experience of the phenomena is likely to be different. Conversely, it is much easier to observe 'unhappiness' and therefore avoid situations that create it.



## Conclusion

Happiness is only one factor associated with motivation, it may be important and the degree of importance will be contextual. My recommendations for using happiness to help motivate your team are:

- **First be aware of unhappiness** - it is a powerful de-motivator and the causes of unhappiness need to be addressed. Everyone will experience unhappiness differently so careful observation is needed to notice what's occurring and then alleviate the issues.
- **Seeking to create happiness is less important.** If you focus on the other elements needed to create a motivated team<sup>4</sup> such as setting clear objectives, recognition of good performance, the ability for team members to develop personally, and ensuring a cooperative team environment; with luck 'happiness' will emerge spontaneously. Certainly, this can be encouraged by overt actions such as celebrating successes but these need to be genuine celebrations.
- **Don't fake it!** Probably the most unsettling aspect of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*<sup>5</sup> (1932) is the fact everyone is kept 'happy' all of the time by consuming their daily *soma* ration. Huxley's message is that simply being 'happy' is not a viable end in itself!

How important do you think creating a 'happy workplace' is in the overall quest to motivate your team?

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<sup>4</sup> For more on **motivation** see: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1048\\_Motivation.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1048_Motivation.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brave\\_New\\_World](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brave_New_World)

